More than a decade ago Tony Silva (1990) observed that the “merry-go-round of approaches” in the field of second language writing “generates more heat than light and does not encourage consensus on important issues” (p. 18). Silva noted further that “such a situation engenders a great deal of confusion and insecurity among ESL composition teachers” (p. 18). A number of helpful teacher reference books on L2 writing pedagogical methods have appeared since Silva’s observations, for example, Ferris and Hedgcock’s (1998) *Teaching ESL Composition* and Hyland’s (2002) *Teaching and Researching Writing*, to name just two. However, while such introductory overviews of the teaching of L2 writing help pre- and in-service teachers become aware of competing approaches to L2 writing pedagogy, none of them, given their broader goals, focuses so explicitly and extensively on a wide range of methodological controversies as does Christine Casanave’s *Controversies in Second Language Writing: Dilemmas and Decisions in Research and Instruction*. In her characteristically engaging and highly accessible prose style, Casanave evenhandedly foregrounds and backgrounds what are arguably among the most compelling and complex areas of interest in the field of L2 writing—topics that have long attracted well-deserved attention but also provoked protracted debate. Casanave clearly recognizes how crucial it is for classroom practitioners to take control of their decision making, for while questions about, for instance, what helps or hinders L2 writing improvement or how L2 writing is best evaluated may be of abiding intellectual interest to many, they are far more than academic to those who also actually teach L2 writing.
Practitioners, after all, are faced on a daily basis with the need to either make decisions about such questions for themselves in their classrooms or cede decision-making power to the textbooks, syllabi, or program policies already decided upon by others.

It is difficult to think of a key L2 writing controversy, or decision-making challenge, that Casanave does not cover in her volume. The range of topics impressively extends from some of the most fundamental nuts-and-bolts issues—for example, fluency versus accuracy, process versus product, various types of response and their debatable relationship with improvement—to those that are more ideological and theoretical but no less important for classroom practitioner decision making—for example, situatedness and genre theory (i.e., direct instruction vs. learning in situ), the ethics of assessment, accommodation versus resistance to established discourse expectations. Obviously, however, in the six chapters of this book, Casanave does not attempt to provide exhaustive coverage of any single topic (other, single-topic books in this series do delve more deeply into their areas of focus). What Casanave does do for the reader is clearly and succinctly highlight the main arguments involved in each L2 writing controversy, with expertly selected reviews of the literature and easy-to-relate-to personal accounts of the author’s own grappling with the issues as a writer and writing teacher. One may justifiably wonder, though, considering how rapidly the methodological scene changes, if history won’t eventually take care of currently unresolved controversies for us, sorting out the faddish chaff from what is more pedagogically valuable. The reality is, of course, that one can easily still find teachers and textbooks utilizing approaches, such as controlled composition and current-traditional rhetoric, that L2 writing researchers and theorists long ago lost interest in but that practitioners may still cling to, and perhaps with good reason, based on the day-to-day action research data they have gathered themselves. Certainly no one knows the contexts within individual classrooms better than the teachers whose classrooms they are. Casanave argues, however, that reflection...
on ongoing issues in the field in addition to one’s own classroom experience can lead to “a vision that gives direction to the daily grind” as well as benefit L2 writing students. Far from being a source of further confusion, as many of the conflicting findings of the research literature can initially be, Casanave’s guided tour through the seemingly never-ending debates of our profession will likely encourage readers to read more widely, purposefully, and critically in the field and ultimately to make their own thoughtful, informed decisions about the challenging everyday classroom dilemmas all L2 writing teachers face.

References

